

Experience Lost; Experience Regained

Richard Williams

Her hand rests in mine. It is smooth and cool and comforting. My heart calms down, I lick my lips. “Did that just happen?” I glance over slightly so as not to be seen. She's there, in full, and smiling. I've done it.

It is 8 o'clock, Sunday night. I am in the 8th grade. I ask her to the movies, she accepts. I shower, dress, and clean my mouth. I brush my teeth until they shine, floss 'til my gums bleed. My breath is flawless. I wear sweatpants and a t-shirt, choices I will grow to regret. By 8:30 my ride has arrived. I enter the car. It is damp and cold, dimly lit by the cheap stereo. A bad rock band plays, I am distracted.

I see her. She sits quietly looking at me every few seconds. I look back. We make eye contact and immediately correct ourselves as if we'd broken a law. I can feel my face heat up, am I nervous? I've known her for ages, we're practically best friends. What have I got to worry about?

We arrive at the theater. I am terrified of the endless possibilities the night holds. The inevitable “what-ifs” enter my desperate mind. What if I fail?

It is empty and cold. Dim lights wait while we maneuver to our seats, our shoes sticking to the dirty floor. The screen is bright, an explosion of colors and emotion, but the room is dark, and I am blinded in the dark theater. We sit in the easiest seats so as not to cause a commotion. I peer into the corners of the theater to see if we are alone. We are. The thought of an empty theater enters my mind. I imagine the countless couples who have found love in theaters like this: cold, quiet, and empty. My heart begins to race, again. “If we're alone, I've got to do it. There is no escape.” I continue to think, further detaching myself from the situation. Before long, I'm completely gone.

It is October 2010, my senior year of high school. I lie in her bed, paralyzed. I am ultimately unhappy, but smart enough to hide it. She is oblivious, or at least appears to be. For now, we are calm. Soon, chaos ensues.

June 2011. She asks me where I stand, what we will do. I have no response but the innermost silence I've displayed from the beginning. I have made an error in judgment and action. I am filled with regret like a dam filling with water, slowly slipping away further and further. Now I hear nothing, I only see moving lips and angry expressions. We are alone, we always were. Separate from the public, partitioned from society, seemingly miserable.

"I love you," she whimpers.

I am silent. I peer into her eyes. I see despair, a ship lost at sea with no hope. A creature engulfed with fear, the fear of loneliness. She stares back; what does she see? I am empty, bare, and numb. I am a rock, cold and stoic. I will not break, not for this. Her eyes become more desperate; have I done something? I have failed to do something, I always have.

"I love you too," I stutter back.

I don't and never did.

The loud noises from the film bring me back. I watch Christian Bale and Scarlett Johansson embrace. I look for myself, but see nothing, only Bale and Johansson. They are not us and never will be. They are characters in a film, existing merely on lifeless celluloid. They exemplify life but are not alive. He grips her body; they are ideal love, the prototype I seek to actualize here now. His jaw is defined, chest swollen. Her lips are plump, breasts protruding. His three-piece suit flawless and pristine, her dress exudes effortless beauty. I turn to my date; her lips appear flat, chest deflated. Her ripped jeans and tacky t-shirt only add to my disdain of the situation. I dare not consider myself; I know I will only be disappointed. The specimens on screen continue to flaunt themselves while I sit in dismay, unequal and unable to compete with them. I feel inadequate and unworthy. My date appears bored, sitting with her legs crossed at the knee. She is leaning toward me, resting on her hand. Her eyes are barely open. She can't stand this. I lean into her ear.

"Are you enjoying it?" I whisper.

“Of course,” she says, lying.

What do I do? What does she want? “You know what she wants,” I say to myself. “So just do it.”

I lean back in my uncomfortable theater chair contemplating my obligation. “Be a man; do it,” I tell myself. “I can’t, not now, not here. Not like this. Not in a dark, desolate theater.” My face is warm, my palms are wet. I clench my jaw in anger and self-disgust. “Do it.” I turn to her and embrace. Our lips touch. I hesitate. In less than a second I forget everything: where I am, what I’m doing, why I’m doing it. Our lips continue to touch. The bright lights from the screen shine the sides of our adolescent faces, but we are not concerned with that. We are here, now, in the moment. Alive and well, in a lustful clench. We care not what will or what has, merely what is. Her hand snakes into mine, and we slowly ease back into our chairs in unison.

Our thoughts are more powerful than any weapon, and they effectively destroy the possibility of real experiences. We cannot succumb to expectations, attempting to find the ideal fiction in our lived reality. American philosopher, novelist, and doctor Walker Percy offers this diagnosis in his 1954 essay titled “The Loss of the Creature.” His prescription for liberating ourselves from the prison of our preconceptions, for regaining our “sovereignty,” is simple: forget what you know; instead, learn again. No kisses, only Kiss. Forget the love on screen, the passionate embrace into the sunset, for it is not love, only a cheap illusion to sell tickets. Don’t accept that illusion as anything but fiction, for it will be the bane of your happiness, as it was mine. Liberate yourself, venture out, relearn your experiences. Seek new things, things you never imagined you’d try. Try them all. Forget your idol, and find Yourself. We are Human; it’s about time we began acting like it.

In “The Loss of the Creature,” Percy compares the experiences of the first explorer who discovered the Grand Canyon to those of any present day sightseer visiting the Grand Canyon. The

explorer saw a vast naturally formed wonder while the sightseer fails to truly see anything. Percy expresses the difference in scientific terms: the explorer, a “sovereign individual,” realized the full potential value of the experience, P, because the canyon was new and inconceivable. The sovereign individual experiences naturally and fully, disregarding useless propaganda that attempts to convey the experience, such as postcards or photographs. The sightseer, or “saturated individual,” can only observe a very small fraction of P. Even on his first physical visit to the Canyon, he or she does not see it for the first time, but rather probably for the thousandth time. This sightseer has seen the Canyon in postcards, magazines, or books and inevitably views it through this prism. Even the name, Grand Canyon, implies enough to ruin the initial experience. The sightseer is saturated with preconceptions, his or her mind clogged with expectations and the inability to adequately actualize them. This, as Percy labels it, is the symbolic complex or preconceived notion; it is the damnation of the individual and the same ailment that I suffered from in the theater that dreadful night (459). I viewed love through the symbolic complex of fictional love: riding into the sunset void of troubles and worry. But that is not love or happiness: it is fiction, and my attempts to live up to the fiction only sped up my inevitable self-destruction.

The first debate at hand is whether the symbolic complex is in sync with the actual event or scene. Is it, or could it ever be? For me, never. If we accept ideas about a specific entity (whether it is a scene, event, or emotion, etc.) before actually experiencing it, the entity can never match the received ideas. It may be similar, maybe even nearly identical, but it simply is not the same. It’s like knowing the punch line to the funniest joke in the world: you’ll never find it as funny as you did when you heard it for the first time.

But here’s the deeper problem: since we always know the punch line, we are never surprised by our experiences. In this day and age, it is nearly impossible to truly experience anything without prior knowledge. So how do we recover our experiences, or as Percy puts it, our sovereignty? Simple: “by leaving the beaten track” (460). Escape the monotony of preconceived notions. Don’t read the review

before seeing the film or hear the story before going on the trip. Do it yourself. In this case, we do not need the ideas of others, as they only aid in the destruction of our own. We as humans are graced with the potential for much more. We are doing an injustice to ourselves to not venture into the depths of our own minds to seek new ideals and complexes. In the world of predetermined experiences, ignorance is key.

I suffered the fate of the saturated sightseer. I saw love portrayed in films and books and strove to actualize that symbolic complex in the heart of an unsuspecting partner. I was blinded by the inevitable instability that comes with this complex; the fact that the complex does not exist and the never-ending attempts to superimpose it into our lives cause nothing but pain and regret. It began with a kiss, the kiss that seemingly ruined my youth. With it I saw life anew, life on the silver-screen translated into reality. Every moment was precious; the imitation was essential. I had to be Christian Bale, while she was Scarlett Johansson. I knew we were neither of these actors, but that was not enough to end the complex. If we couldn't be them physically, we would be them through our actions and motivations. I spent nearly five years searching for this symbolic complex, trying day after day to create it as I had seen it. When I couldn't, it only proved to destroy me. If I could not actualize the simple ideals of fictional characters, if life was not better than what I actually saw it for, then what was life worth living? Every moment was spent asleep, dulling my senses to the unique experiences of a high schooler's everyday life. Instead of experiencing, I dreamt. I dreamt of what I wanted to see, not what actually was. I dreamt to make the day more interesting, because reality was simply not enough.

Life is the impracticality of everyday experience, and it could happen to anyone. But *we* are anyone, unique individuals with the possibility of unique ideals and complexes. We are the sovereign population. And for what? Ask not the media or pop culture, but rather, yourself. Seek the experience found in yourself, not the outside world, for it is all that we as humans truly have. Heed my call, reader. You are capable of limitless mental potential. The only thing holding you back, after all, is you.

Works Cited

Percy, Walker. "The Loss of the Creature." *Ways of Reading: An Anthology for Writers*. Ed. David Bartholomae and Anthony Petrosky. 9th ed. Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2011. 459-71.